

Amanda Solomon, ID - 2015

Our society today is filled with complacency and inaction. The media frenzies and twitter activism surrounding social injustices die down as quickly as they began; party polarization creates a friction stagnating any real progress in Washington, and too often, teenagers like myself forget that they have a social responsibility to make their voices heard. The United States Youth Program combated these negative trends by instilling a renewed hope in my heart and igniting 104 sparks of cooperation, confidence, and ambition.

My week in Washington was a wakeup call to what kind of person I need to become in order to affect the kind of change I've worked toward. Surrounded constantly by role models in the form of accomplished professionals as well as accomplished youth, I was inspired by the depth of drive, passion, and intelligence demonstrated by those I interacted with.

One of the greatest honors of my life thus far was the opportunity for our delegate group to meet with President Barack Obama. To be in the same room as one of the most powerful men in the world left us all awed and a bit shell-shocked, and a compliment from the leader of the free world is something none of us will ever forget.

I also loved hearing from President Jim Yong Kim of the World Bank. I wasn't alone when I sheepishly admitted, even as we walked through the soaring atrium of its headquarters, that I did not actually know what the World Bank was. I'm so glad he was on our list of distinguished speakers, because as someone whose primary interests are in diplomacy, refugee affairs, and international development, his words offered a glimpse into government and U.S. foreign policy from a very different viewpoint.

The Senate reception on Wednesday night was an event that I will never forget. Seeing these larger-than-life figures take the time out of their extremely busy schedules to come spend a few minutes with us meant more than they will ever know. Senator Jim Risch, from my home state of Idaho, was so kind in staying and talking with Caitlin and me.

The pages and pages of notes I took while listening to and learning from our many amazing speakers taught me a lot, but I learned even more from the long days spent with the 103 other delegates. Here assembled was a group of students unlike any other I'd ever been with: the intelligence, political knowledge, and humor was unparalleled. I was impressed by the level of maturity displayed; from the first night I realized that these delegates were not simply high school students - they were world-changers in the making. The first step in accomplishing anything lasting is having courage, and I gained mine from the examples they had already set, in pioneering for equality, opportunity, progress, and innovation.

Before I was chosen as the Idaho delegate for the United States Senate Youth Program, I had taken minor roles in government agencies and was reasonably well-versed in the political issues of the moment, but after getting such a unique, behind-the-scenes look at Washington and hearing personally from the people who've dedicated their lives to public service, I have a more complete appreciation for the complicated, contentious, wonderful system that is our country's government and a love for the work of public service. I look forward to the future and know that I will find a way to bring my unique skills and paradigms to the table in public service.

I thank the Hearst Foundations, USSYP staff, our Senate sponsors, and all those who took time to meet with us for this amazing gift they have given this year's delegate class. Washington Week 2015 was truly a life-changing experience that I will continue to learn from and forever treasure.